

Interview with
ALAN ANDERSON

November 17, 2020

**THE PANDEMIC YEARS: COVID-19
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

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ALAN ANDERSON

Alan Anderson was interviewed on November 17, 2020 in the St. George, Utah branch of the Washington County Library System (WCLS) by Sara Whitehead. He related his experiences as the branch manager and assistant director of the WCLS with how the library adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic.

SW: Hello, I am Sara Whitehead. I'm here with Alan Anderson, who is the branch manager of the St. George branch of the Washington County Library System.

AA: And the assistant director, also, of the Washington County Library System.

SW: Yes, he is. We're here in the library on November 17, 2020, to talk about this year, 2020. So Alan, how has the library reacted to, especially to the threat of COVID-19?

AA: Oh, 2020 has been quite a year.

SW: It has. [Laughter.]

AA: And we have had some adjustments when we first started out. First, as everything rolled out with COVID-19, I think there was a learning process, as some of the information that came out initially, ended up, even though it came from the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] and other places, ended up being information which then they changed. And, you know, initially, it was thought that it was highly contagious for touch and lived on surfaces long amounts of times. And then that's come out that maybe that's not quite so much the case. But it has caused us to adjust and to do some things as well.

Initially, we started out by adjusting seating in the library, making sure that we were maintaining the social distances as they were recommended by officials. And we also, then adjusted as time went on, when they were asking for less and less contact for the amount of time we recommended for people being in the library. Then we actually closed for a period of time. And then we started curbside service, which we did for a short amount, you were involved in that as well. Sara ended up being one that was running material out to cars. And so, that was a new thing for us, we've never really done a curbside service type environment. That worked quite well for the time we did it. But it's a lot of work. It's a lot more work than just regular library service. It's taxing on the staff, and it has its downside, as well. But it is a way to get material out to people and to have them be able to still, while they're quarantined at home, have things to do. So, we did the curbside service.

Then, when the library came back out of that, and as things began to open up, we did the same type of thing, again, the reverse process on the reopening. Which is, initially, we didn't have people, we recommended they were only here for fifteen or twenty minutes, come and pick stuff up and go. And then we started saying, "Okay, well, you can be in

here an hour.” And we started putting out more seating. And then we got to the point where we were fully open but operating under COVID-19 restrictions and still encouraging people to maintain social-distancing.

All along we have been disinfecting and washing surfaces, both hard surfaces and computers, and all of the areas where we have people in and touching. In terms of the material coming in, we have washed or disinfected everything that has come in; we have been doing that. While we were closed, we actually washed and disinfected everything, even that wasn’t COVID-related. Because of the time frame, we did a full inventory in the library system, and in St. George and so we washed every item. At least at this branch, I know that we washed every item and disinfected so that when we reopened, during that time period, that we could assure people that everything had been disinfected.

So, COVID has had quite an impact in terms of staffing and staff resources, and time and energy and effort. We continue to wash. We are actually going to be purchasing some UV [ultraviolet] disinfectant machines, which I guess is like the old, well it’s not a microwave or an Easy-Bake Oven, but that’s the concept. So, we’ll get those; we’ll have them, we’ll put the material in them. And then it will run its cycle, which is disinfecting not only, it has a fan and a blower in it so that it’s opening books. So, you put them in there, and then it will disinfect. So, it’s been good though, to disinfect the stuff with the chemical that we’ve been using, because initially, and I think Sara and other staff members commented particularly in the children’s area, we had a lot of material and the rags were coming off quite dirty. So, of course we tried to be careful with books that were paperbacks or other types of things. We didn’t put a lot of stuff on them, but we did try to wash and disinfect them. And I think it has made things look quite a bit better in terms of the material in general.

So, those are some of the adjustments, in answer to your question about, you know, how we’ve adjusted and how it’s impacted the library. I think there have been significant impacts, staffing and the adjustments we’ve made with where staff are deployed. It has been stretching a little bit for us, but we’ve maintained and been able to do that and continue to serve the public. And I think as people have come in, they’ve been appreciative of that, and they’ve noticed those efforts. Of course, COVID-19, in terms of the public, has a varying reception rate, as some people feel like, you know, they’re highly concerned and afraid and, and people have said, I, you know, “I go to the library to get my stuff and I go to the grocery store, and I’m not going anywhere else.” And we have people that operate under an area of high concern about the situation. Then on the other side, and we see as we work with the public, we have people that think it’s a hoax, there’s nothing to it. And they’re upset that the people are buying into it. So we continue to operate with the public and try to take people where they are and accept their views, but be reasonable and try to adjust and be responsible in maintaining and meeting the requirements, just like we do all the time.

SW: Just like we do all the time. [Laughter.] Have all the branches been doing the same things? Or have some of the other branches in the Washington County Library System been doing some different things?

AA: Okay, yes, we have eight locations. Initially, during the closure, I think we were all pretty well aligned, in terms of what we were doing. Coming out of the closure, although, some differences emerged. We had some branches, even though we had the chemical disinfectant, that felt like a quarantine was a better approach. And so, we do have some branches that were trying to quarantine. Washington and Santa Clara, particularly, were quarantining. Washington, though, at one point said this is not maintainable. I mean, if you leave stuff, bins of stuff sitting for days at a time, it just gets you behind. So it's hard to adjust, in terms of pulling holds, getting stuff back on the shelf, and having patrons feel like they've got— they turn their stuff in, how come it's not showing up as it's been turned in when you quarantine? So, Washington went away from that; they're disinfecting with the chemical disinfectant like everyone else. Santa Clara, however, is still quarantining stuff. And, you know, we get people that we hear from that are upset about the delay in the check-in and things. So, I say people take this different ways, some appreciate, and some feel like you bought into the conspiracy. So, everyone at this point is disinfecting with the chemical compound that we have, which is provided to us from the county. Spartan Chemicals is the one that does that. Except for Santa Clara, who is still quarantining.

SW: On, I guess, a more personal note, what are your days like compared to before 2020, and everything happened?

AA: So, the days get interrupted significantly with COVID-19, particularly during the closure, when we did the inventory, which is a huge undertaking for the library. The last time we did a full inventory of the library system was almost a decade ago, in 2011. And so, we had an opportunity to do an inventory. As we did the inventory, we found that really, in that intervening time, we've done a pretty good job. There are a few items that were identified as missing inventory. But in terms of our total holdings, it was a fairly small percentage. So, the days, though, in inventory were much different than a day for being open. We would come to the library, we get here, we would divide up into teams, we kind of have the teams established and some of that was COVID-19 as well, which is we're trying to limit exposure to people so it's not like we're all sitting in a room. And so, the team was composed of one person pulling material off the shelf, one person scanning, one person washing, and then that usually was a team of three. By and large, they didn't really sit next to each other for hours at a time, or in close proximity. Most of the teams had the three people working, and they would drop it off and go get another cart, or take the cart back and put it back on the shelf. So, our days were really quite busy with the inventory.

And then curbside service actually was, I would say, three times the work of regular library service. So, that kept us busy pulling stuff, answering phones, taking material out to cars. So, COVID-19, if I was to say, in answer to your question, how is it different in COVID-19 than before COVID-19, I would say everything became much busier, and actually a little more hectic.

And then, of course, now we're into, I think, what they're calling the second wave. And so, we're back to trying to encourage people to be responsible and wear masks and social distance. All along, though, we've continued to do the disinfectant for surfaces and computers. I would say that it's busier during the COVID-19 than it was, and it's not that we were just sitting around on our hands before. We were busy before, it's just it's added another level of complexity and work to our day.

SW: What are some of the largest changes you've seen outside of the library, but in like the community itself?

AA: You know, I think that some of the changes, and we just went through a political season where we were looking at electing a president and other political leaders, as well. I think some of the bigger changes, outside of the library that I've observed, would be the level of polarization in society. COVID-19 has tended to, as I mentioned, has made people, some of them feel like there is imminent danger, and others feel like it's a hoax and there's no danger at all. And the political landscape kind of played out in the same way. It seems like my observation is society has become much more polarized, there are bigger divides, less harmony. I think we've had, not in St. George so much, I think they did have a demonstration, but we haven't had what some areas in the country have had, where people are so polarized that it's erupted into violence and looting. And I think even up in Salt Lake [City, Utah] they've had, they had some of that. So it, it has had a negative impact on society, in terms of harmony and acceptance of others and views and that type of thing. It's my opinion, is that it has more polarized than unified.

SW: On that note, how do you feel like our community here in St. George is reacting differently than other places? And maybe, why do you think that is?

AA: So, I think that our community has reacted differently, but it doesn't mean that some of those same sentiments and feelings aren't there. I think that there has been, and I'm glad to say, a little higher degree of tolerance. Even though there have been demonstrations, I think we've had picketers on both sides. Fortunately, that hasn't erupted into the loss of life that it has in other communities in areas. And I would say that it reflects that we do have a good community and people that care about each other. But there is still a divide in opinion.

SW: If 2020 was a book, what would some of the different chapters be titled and what would they be about?

AA: The title of a book. Well, I think that it would be "2020 in Disarray" [laughter]. I don't know, maybe there's a better title than that. But 2020 has been, and with COVID-19, the political landscape; and then in our area too, we had a flood, and bad rainstorms, which actually impacted the library in a very negative way. We sustained significant damage with the water that came into the basement. That was in August, the last of August, August 23rd, I believe, was the rain. We discovered the problem on August 24, on Monday when we came into the library. And so, that has been really quite disruptive to

what we've done. And it has been a situation where we have been trying to adjust and make sure that we're addressing issues and taking care of things.

Some of the chapter headings would probably be "Is the world coming to an end?" [Laughter.] I think that some people have felt that way. Another chapter heading could be "Stay Tuned" [laughter]. Or "Masks" [laughter] with a question mark. I think we've had some chapters that people have had difficult adjustments to. Masks, as we see at the library, we have people that come in, and like I said, don't want to wear a mask. I think another chapter heading could be "Shortages. You're kidding!" [laughter] because, you know, we have had the stores had runs on them in terms of things like toilet paper, and food, and cleaning supplies. And still today, I go to the stores and still find empty shelves in certain areas, and certain items aren't in high supply. So, I think that in terms of a book and chapter headings, there would be a lot of material for coming up with some really good titles. I don't know that I have the best title for you [laughter], but I think that, really, the world coming to an end has been on some people's minds because of the situation and the drama that has kind of unfolded, as this has all played out. And people have scrambled to get materials and supplies and then frustration with not having stuff.

And another chapter title could be "Panic? Over What?" because that's some people's feeling. Another chapter could be "Panic? Justified," [laughter] because there are people that have, I think, really had some emotional trauma over this. I think, by and large, I think most people that we see come into the library seem to be living life and going on as normal, but making adjustments and adjusting to a different scenario than what they would normally like. I know, as we come to the holiday season with Thanksgiving and Christmas, and we have governors and others, you know, coming out with mandates about wearing masks and social-distancing, and not being in close proximity to people other than your immediate family. That is a thing that's hard for people to contemplate, because usually, you know, people travel in the holidays, and they go see family in other parts of the country. There is some anxiety, I would say, in society about boarding airplanes. And I think that when this started, cruise ships, you know, some people do that type of thing for the holiday. Right now, cruise ships are still not running. And so, some of those areas have really had negative economic impacts, shortages, in part, have been caused by people not being able to be at work and process goods and services. And, you know, we had high school seniors, back when school got out in the spring, when this was in full swing, where they felt like they were cheated out of a high school graduation and other things that others had had, but they couldn't have. So really, there are adjustments in society. And titles of chapters of books, I guess, would depend on where you fit into that. I think high school seniors would say, "Graduation, When?" That would be their title of their chapter.

We have had some unique settings. It's been since our last major pandemic, not too many people remember the Spanish Flu of almost 100 years ago, I think 1917/18, was in that time frame. And so, there are probably a few people alive, but very few because there aren't too many people that are 100 years old. So, you know, we have a situation, which is in a generation or two, is unique, and not a lot of experience. I think that there has been criticism on both sides for either not doing enough or doing too much. Some of that is, I

think, people don't have the experience or have the memory to remember what happened in the Spanish Flu and these other timeframes. And so, if we were a little more cognizant of what had happened in history, I guess, they say with history if you don't know and understand it, you're doomed to repeat it. And maybe to some extent, we're not doing a good job with some of those past events and how others dealt with them. And maybe we can learn a little bit from the past.

SW: I like that. So, besides COVID, how have these other major events that have happened this year affected you, not just the library, but, like, you?

AA: Me? [Laughter.] Well, I guess the events in terms of a personal impact, you know, I think with the flood, on a personal level, I had a knee problem at the same time all of this was unfolding. And so, I was not able to do as much as what I would normally do. And that was a little bit of a frustration to have all of these things happening, but be in kind of a slowed down mode due to a knee operation. But, you know, came through that the library, we got the flood pretty much adjusted to; we still have to get the building back in shape. And those things all have a personal impact, because they, even though it's work, it impacts you in a personal way. So, we try not to take those things home, but we still have to deal with them and think about them.

And so, I would say on a personal level, my mind is full of all of these things, which are surrounding us. And I think most people are actually, you know, with COVID-19. And as we go to stores, as we interact, both professionally and personally. And socially and economically, there have been big impacts in society. And I think, you know, well, I have a job and I'm fully employed. When we had the closure, then, you know, you have the what-if scenarios where people were being, basically, let go of their jobs or places were closing, small businesses— some of them folded, other people were furloughed. And so, those all have an impact in society and personally, I guess, it creates an uncertainty. And so, while I wasn't terribly worried, you do have to worry and think, "Well, what if?" I think it's the what-if scenario. "What if this were happening to me or my family? And how would we adjust?" So, I think all of those things occupy a place in your mind. Some of them you dismiss, and some of them you think, "I better give this a little more thought."

SW: Thanks. Well, that's all the questions I have.

AA: Oh, that's all.

SW: Yeah [laughter].

AA: Okay. Well, maybe I'll just talk a little bit more, then, about some of the things in terms of the library and what we're doing. And, you know, we have looked also at growth, and development [in] our area is really growing. I think that that's had an impact and stretches us at the library, as well. So, as we look at growth and how that affects us, we need to look at things like new branches; we have eight locations, you asked about that earlier in the interview, and how different locations were interacting or the type of things

that were happening. As we look at locations, we have a lot of growth in the south end of the valley, out towards the airport in [the] Bloomington [Utah] area. We probably need to look at how we address growth and library service from the perspective of the library to those areas. In terms of planning a location, we don't have any property or we don't have immediate plans to build a library, but we are looking at those things because of the growth, you know. Other branches that need expansion, the Enterprise [Utah] branch, for instance, they have expanded; they had a building they expanded. I think they're at a point now where it'd be good to expand again, their community has grown. You know, we have a lot of growth in our area— people moving in, we have people coming in from other states and locations. I think the St. George area is actually one of the highest growing areas in the nation right now. And so, we have to address that from an institutional perspective at the library and look at how we adjust and what adjustments are needed. Is that new locations? Is it new hours?

We have technology considerations, things are constantly changing from a technology standpoint. We have to update our technology; computers outdate. Those are budget considerations. As we try to balance the budget, in terms of where we spend the money and planning for growth, we've been encouraged by the commission to try to save for a new building and a new library, and those are expensive things that happen. We would need to budget and try to save.

The county is looking at building a new administration building; they're also feeling growing pains and need to grow themselves. Really, in the library, in the area, in St. George, I would say one of our biggest challenges right now is the growth that is occurring around us. Roads tend to get plugged up and busy and so infrastructure is an area where they need to look at. I know that some roads have expanded. I think over in Washington, Telegraph [Street] used to be a two-lane road, now they've got multiple lanes. As growth happens, they've adjusted there as well.

The library has the same type of issues and we have to make adjustments for expanding growth and development as it occurs. You know we have eight locations, they're spread out. Our newest location we opened was out in Hildale and it's been well-received. Of our small branches, it's our busiest small branch at this point. That was an opportunity to serve a community that was really underserved and to some extent had not had the opportunity to have a library in the past due to political and other considerations. As we look at the expanding areas around us, it seems like the south end of the valley is where, really, the growth is at this point. And with the airport, and that area, it's been growing rapidly. So, we have other growth that's happening in areas, but with a branch in Washington, there's been growth and development there, they have been able to address that.

As we look at COVID-19, and how that affects us, from the national level, they're saying that we're really close to getting some medications, which will help with that, and they're in trials. And so, you know, if there's a vaccine or something, that could really impact society, not just here, but nationwide, worldwide, in terms of opening things back up and getting things to move again. And so, the library, I think, is positioned well to respond to

and help meet needs in the community. And so, as we look at what's going on around us, all of these things impact not only the library, but they impact us personally. And so, even though at the national level, there's a presidential race, which has been hotly contested, I think life goes on as normal. But it does have an impact on us, and it also impacts people in their feelings of security and, and of well-being.

And so, we see that as people come into the library, some people come in and they're very leery or reticent, hesitant; others come in and, like, there's no problem at all and they have no cares in the world. Some people, you know, we face people here at the library that are homeless; we have others that are well-to-do. And so, as we serve the community, I think we have to keep in mind that each person is an individual and not, you know, it's not a one size fits all. We need to customize how we deal with people in our conversations, and allow for them to be individuals. And we have people that are passing through and temporary that we try to serve. And they come in and we try to make information and resources available.

And so, I think that there is reason to be encouraged about what is going on around us and how the world is going forward. It looks like, really, I think if we take into account the Spanish Flu of 100 years ago, people passed through that. And while it was uncomfortable at the time, I think it's uncomfortable for us now. I think we have to take the view of the fact that this too shall pass and we'll get to the other side, and in another hundred years, it will probably be something people can look back on and say, "Well, yes, that was an event. They dealt with it, we can deal with it, too." And I think that's what these other events in history should help us to have perspective on, is that we will get to the other side of this. It's not something that humankind has not faced before. It is a problem, but we can do it.

SW: Thanks. I love that. That was great.

[END OF RECORDING. END OF INTERVIEW.]